

Message Text

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PAGE 01 BANGKO 13656 01 OF 02 221208Z
ACTION EA-06

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INFO DIA WASHDC
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CINCPAC HONOLULU HI

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 13656

LIMDIS

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, TH
SUBJECT: POLITICAL ROLE OF GENERAL KRIANGSAK CHAMANAN

REF: (A) BANGKOK 8479 (B) BANGKOK 10864

SUMMARY. EVENTS IN THAILAND SINCE THE COUP OF OCTOBER 6, 1976, HAVE UNDERLINED THE STEADILY GROWING INFLUENCE OF GENERAL KRIANGSAK CHAMANAN, DEPUTY SUPREME COMMANDER SINCE OCTOBER 1, 1976. ALTHOUGH HE HAS LONG BEEN CONSIDERED LIKELY TO BE APPOINTED SUPREME COMMANDER UPON THE RETIREMENT OF ACM KAMON DECHATUNGKHA ON SEPTEMBER 30, 1977, RECENT DEVELOPMENTS LEAD US TO CONCLUDE THAT HE ALMOST CERTAINLY HARBORS GREATER AMBITIONS.

1. THE DEPARTMENT IS FAMILIAR WITH KRIANGSAK'S CAREER,
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PAGE 02 BANGKO 13656 01 OF 02 221208Z

BUT WE FEEL THAT THE FOLLOWING PERSPECTIVES MERIT
SPECIAL ATTENTION:

A) AS SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE NARC, WHICH CARRIED OUT THE COUP OF OCTOBER 6, AND OF ITS SUCCESSOR, THE PMAC (PRIME MINISTER'S ADVISORY COUNCIL), KRIANGSAK HAS BROUGHT HIS INFLUENCE TO BEAR CONTINUOUSLY AND AT THE HIGHEST LEVELS ON ALMOST EVERY ISSUE OF NATIONAL

SIGNIFICANCE. THE PMAC IS THE PRINCIPAL INSTRUMENTALITY THROUGH WHICH THE THAI MILITARY EXERCISE SUPERVISION AND CONTROL OVER THE LARGELY CIVILIAN CABINET OF PRIME MINISTER THANIN KRAIWICHIAN, AND AS THE MOST INTELLIGENT AND DYNAMIC MEMBER OF THE COUNCIL, KRIANGSAK HAS GROWN TO BE THE PERSON WHOSE VIEWS ON MOST ISSUES ARE LIKELY TO PREVAIL.

B) HIS STATUS AS THE INDISPENSABLE MAN WAS DEMONSTRATED FURTHER WHEN HE PLAYED A KEY ROLE IN DEFUSING THE TENSE SITUATION CREATED BY THE ABORTIVE COUP OF MARCH 26, 1977. HE NEGOTIATED THE PEACEFUL EVACUATION OF THE TACTICAL OPERATIONS CENTER OF THE ROYAL THAI ARMY WHICH THE COUP LEADERS HAD OCCUPIED EARLY THAT DAY AND TRIED TO ARRANGE FOR THEIR DEPARTURE. IT WAS OBVIOUS THAT HE WAS THE PERSON WHOM THE THAI LEADERSHIP DEPENDED ON TO RESTORE THE STATUS QUO.

C) IN THE EVENTS OF JUNE 3-9, 1977, WHEN BANGKOK WAS SWEEPED BY RUMORS OF AN IMPENDING COUP, GENERAL KRIANGSAK AGAIN PLAYED THE KEY, AND PROBABLY DETERMINING ROLE. THE EVENTS BEGAN JUNE 3 WITH A CALL ON GENERAL SOEM NO NAKHON, COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF THE ROYAL THAI ARMY, BY NINE FIELD GRADE OFFICERS, SEVERAL OF WHOM COMMANDED BATTALIONS OF TROOPS IN THE BANGKOK AREA. THE OFFICERS EXPRESSED DISSATISFACTION WITH THE GOVERNMENT IN STRONG TERMS AND

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PAGE 03 BANGKO 13656 01 OF 02 221208Z

DEMANDED THE RESIGNATION OF THE CABINET. IN SUBSEQUENT MEETINGS, THEY URGED GENERAL KRIANGSAK TO AUTHORIZE A COUP AND BECOME PRIME MINISTER. KRIANGSAK TOOK THE POSITION THAT A COUP AT THIS TIME WOULD BE BAD FOR THAILAND, BAD FOR ITS IMAGE, AND LIKELY TO DISCOURAGE FOREIGN INVESTMENT NEEDED TO DEVELOP THE THAI ECONOMY. THE FACT THAT HE TURNED DOWN THIS OPPORTUNITY DOES NOT MEAN THAT HE WILL DO SO AT SOME FUTURE DATE.

D) IN THE EIGHT MONTHS SINCE THE THANIN GOVERNMENT WAS FORMED, KRIANGSAK HAS BEEN CONSPICUOUSLY SUPPORTIVE OF THE PRIME MINISTER, BUT HIS POSITION HAS CHANGED. IN RECENT WEEKS, KRIANGSAK HAS BEEN OUTSPOKEN IN CRITICISM OF THANIN AS INFLEXIBLE AND NARROW-MINDED. AN OPEN DISPUTE OVER WHAT KRIANGSAK DEEMED THE UNNECESSARY UTILIZATION OF ARTICLE 21 TO PUNISH RAPISTS AND SMUGGLERS ERUPTED AT A RECENT CABINET MEETING. THIS RIFT PERSISTS TO THIS DAY.

2. ALL OF THE ABOVE INDICATE TO US A SLOW BUT STEADY EXPANSION IN THE POLITICAL AMBITIONS OF

GENERAL KRIANGSAK. CURIOUSLY, A KEY FACTOR IN THIS PROCESS MAY HAVE BEEN HIS VISIT TO THE UNITED STATES IN APRIL 1977, DURING WHICH HE WAS GIVEN A THOROUGH PHYSICAL EXAMINATION AT WALTER REED HOSPITAL AND WAS JUDGED TO BE IN GENERALLY GOOD PHYSICAL CONDITION. (KRIANGSAK HAD BEEN TREATED FOR CANCER IN THE US IN 1963, AND HAD HAD PERIODIC PHYSICAL CHECKUPS AT WALTER REED SINCE THEN, BUT HAD APPARENTLY BEEN CONCERNED OVER HIS HEALTH BEFORE VISITING THE US IN APRIL 1977.)

3. WE HAVE A HUNCH THAT KRIANGSAK WAS ALSO IMPRESSED WITH THE WARMTH OF HIS RECEPTION IN THE US. HE ENCOUNTERED NO INDICATION OF THE RESERVATIONS
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PAGE 04 BANGKO 13656 01 OF 02 221208Z

REGARDING HIM THAT VARIOUS AMERICANS HAVE HARBORED IN THE PAST. (HE HAS IN THE PAST BEEN ACCUSED OF CORRUPTION AND OF INVOLVEMENT WITH NARCOTICS TRAFFICKERS, BUT THESE CHARGES WERE NEVER SUBSTANTIATED.) THE WILLINGNESS OF SENIOR AMERICAN OFFICIALS TO ENGAGE IN WIDE-RANGING CONVERSATIONS WITH HIM MAY WELL HAVE CONFIRMED TO HIM THAT HE IS PERCEIVED BY US TO BE A BROAD-GAUGE LEADER OF NATIONAL STATURE AND NOT MERELY A SENIOR MILITARY COMMANDER.

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PAGE 01 BANGKO 13656 02 OF 02 221157Z

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 BANGKOK 13656

LIMDIS

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

4. KRIANGSAK IS VERY SENSITIVE TO POLITICAL CROSS-CURRENTS IN THE UNITED STATES AND THE WELCOME HE HAS GIVEN VISITING AMERICAN LABOR LEADERS AND THE SUPPORT HE HAS GIVEN AAFLI (ASIAN-AMERICAN FREE LABOR INSTITUTE) HAVE BEEN NOTEWORTHY. WE HAVE BEEN INFORMED THAT HE PAID TWO VISITS TO AFL/CIO LEADERS IN WASHINGTON DURING HIS RECENT TRIP. THESE EFFORTS MAY WELL BE DESIGNED TO DILUTE HIS IMAGE AS A MILITARY MAN AND TO ASSURE HIM OF A MODICUM OF AMERICAN UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORT IN CIRCLES WHICH WOULD NOT NECESSARILY VIEW A THAI GENERAL WITH MUCH ENTHUSIASM.

5. WHAT OF THE FUTURE? IF GENERAL KRIANGSAK BECOMES SUPREME COMMANDER ON OCTOBER 1, AS ANTICIPATED, HE CAN REMAIN IN THAT POSITION UNTIL HE REACHES
CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 02 BANGKO 13656 02 OF 02 221157Z

MANDATORY RETIREMENT AGE ON SEPTEMBER 30, 1979. THIS MAY NOT RPT NOT BE THE PATH HE SELECTS. THROUGH HIS MORE SUBTLE POLITICAL APPROACH HE MAY SEEK TO TAKE THE GROUND TO THE LEFT OF PRIME MINISTER THANIN, WITH THE GENERAL APPROVAL OF OTHER THAI LEADERS. THIS MAY NOT RPT NOT BE A PARTICULARLY DIFFICULT OPERATION. PRIME MINISTER THANIN IS FAR FROM BEING A POPULAR LEADER AND HAS A RANGE OF THAI MILITARY AND CIVILIAN LEADERS MORE OR LESS OPENLY CRITICAL OF HIS PERSONALITY AND OF HIS POLICIES. ALTERNATIVES TO THANIN OTHER THAN KRIANGSAK ALL HAVE SERIOUS DRAWBACKS, AND THE VERY LACK OF A VIABLE ALTERNATIVE IS PROBABLY ONE OF KRIANGSAK'S STRENGTHS IN THE PRESENT POLITICAL CONTEXT.

6. KRIANGSAK APPRECIATES THE NEED FOR THE THAI GOVERNMENT TO BROADEN ITS BASE OF SUPPORT. IN THIS CONNECTION, HE HAS SHOWN A SURPRISING RECEPTIVITY TO THE IDEA OF PROMOTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRADE UNIONS. SHORTLY AFTER THE OCTOBER 6 COUP, KRIANGSAK INVITED A GROUP OF THAI LABOR LEADERS TO HIS HOME FOR DINNER, COOKING IT HIMSELF (HE IS A SKILLED AMATEUR CHEF), AND REASSURING THEM THAT HE, AT LEAST, WAS NOT RPT NOT ANTI-LABOR. HE ARRANGED SUBSEQUENTLY FOR A MEETING OF THAI LABOR LEADERS WITH THE NARC ON OCTOBER 18, AT WHICH IT WAS ALSO

STRESSED THAT THE MILITARY LEADERS WERE NOT RPT
NOT HOSTILE TO ORGANIZED LABOR.

7. THERE IS AN ELUSIVE QUALITY ABOUT HIS LARGER
POLITICAL VIEWS. REFTELS PROVIDE THE TEXTS OF TWO
RECENT SPEECHES HE HAS MADE--ONE HIGHLY CRITICAL
OF SOME US ACTIONS, DELIVERED ON APRIL 19. THE
OTHER SPEECH, ACUTALLY MADE IN THE COURSE OF A
PRESS CONFERENCE ON MAY 16 ON HIS RETURN FROM THE
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PAGE 03 BANGKO 13656 02 OF 02 221157Z

UNITED STATES, TAKES A GENERALLY POSITIVE VIEW OF
AMERICA. IT IS PROBABLE THAT NEITHER SPEECH REALLY
PROVIDES A FULL EXPRESSION OF HIS VIEWS ON THAI
RELATIONS WITH THE UNITED STATES.

8. THE EMBASSY BELIEVES THAT GENERAL KRIANGSAK,
IN THE PRESENT CONTEXT, HAS A VERY CONSIDERABLE
FUTURE AS A MAJOR THAI POLITICAL FIGURE. AT AGE 59
IN DECEMBER OF THIS YEAR AND IN GENERALLY GOOD HEALTH,
HE DEFINITELY APPEARS TO BE DEVELOPING A LARGER
POLITICAL ROLE. HE MAY HAVE HAD AN OPPORTUNITY TO
TAKE POWER IN EARLY JUNE AND, IF SO, HE TURNED IT
DOWN, PERHAPS FEELING THAT HE DOES NOT RPT NOT WISH
TO APPEAR ON THE POLITICAL SCENE AS A MILITARY COMMANDER
BROUGHT TO POWER BY ARMY BAYONETS. AS HE
HAS MOVED INTO A LARGER POLITICAL ROLE, SOME SIGNS
OF OPPOSITION TO HIM WITHIN THE ARMY HAVE BEGUN TO
APPEAR. ALTHOUGH HE PLAYED A KEY ROLE IN DEFUSING
THE ABORTIVE COUP OF MARCH 26, SOME ARMY OFFICERS--
SUPPORTERS OF THE LATE GENERAL CHALAT--FEEL HE BETRAYED
CHALAT AS A MEANS OF ELIMINATING A POTENTIAL RIVAL.
THERE ARE INDICATIONS THAT KRIANGSAK IS REGARDED WITH
INCREASING SUSPICION AMONG SOME IMPORTANT CIVILIAN
AND MILITARY GROUPS AS A RESULT OF A COVERT ACTION
CAMPAIGN INITIATED BY SUPREME COMMAND THAT IS DESIGNED
TO UNDERMINE THANIN AND AS A RESULT OF KRIANGSAK'S
REPORTED INVOLVEMENT WITH THE FIELD GRADE OFFICERS
PROMINENT IN THE EVENTS OF JUNE 3. THESE MISGIVINGS
AND RESERVATIONS ABOUT KRIANGSAK ARE LIKELY TO GROW
AS HIS POLITICAL POSITION STRENGTHENS.

9. IN ANY CASE, RECENT ACTIONS OF GENERAL KRIANGSAK
INDICATE THAT HE IS MANEUVERING TO APPEAL TO A FAR
BROADER SEGMENT OF THAI SOCIETY AND THAT HE IS CARVING
OUT A POSITION TO THE LEFT OF THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT
WHICH WILL PERMIT HIM TO DRAW SUPPORT FROM ELEMENTS
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PAGE 04 BANGKO 13656 02 OF 02 221157Z

WHICH WOULD OTHERWISE REJECT HIS QUALIFICATIONS.
THERE IS A GOOD DEAL OF SUPPORT IN A SOCIETY LIKE
THIS ONE FOR A STRONG AND CRAFTY NATIONAL LEADER
WHO IS SYMPATHETIC TO THE ASPIRATIONS OF THE
POOR AND HUMBLE. GENERAL KRIANGSAK'S POSITION
APPEARS TO US TO BE VERY STRONG AT THIS TIME.
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